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ABSTRACT

Conflicting findings on television's impact on reading achievement suggest a need for more sophisticated measurements and methodologies in media research. D. L. Moldenhauer and W. H. Miller's survey of 78 seventh grade students showed no relationship between television viewing and reading skills. These findings were similar to those of J. T. Feely's 1980 literature review. Canadian surveys of parents and teachers indicated that neither group felt television viewing influenced reading achievement. On the other hand, studies by N. L. Sproull and her colleagues of an educational program for young children suggested that programs such as "The Electric Company" improved reading skills slightly and helped teach reading related skills to young viewers. S. Neuman and P. Prowda's 1981 survey of 8,000 students in grades 4, 8, and 11 revealed that while the amount of television fourth grade students viewed failed to influence their reading scores, more than four hours of viewing daily among eighth and eleventh grade students correlated positively with lower reading scores. Recent research, such as that by C. M. Bachen and her colleagues, suggests that it is possible to locate an orientation within television sequence that positively predicts reading achievement, with cognitive involvement with television representing skills that parallel those necessary for good reading. Thus, while some studies described a negative relationship between television and reading skills, others indicated that children can develop through television the critical thinking skills they need in reading. (MM)

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A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISION VIEWING ON THE READING ACHIEVEMENT OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Submitted by
Penelope Hatt

Television is potentially the greatest educational medium since printing was invented (Chamberlin, 1976). Yet constant outcries against television have been heard by parents and educators alike. This great educational medium has had much influence on today's children. This influence, whether one believes it to be good or bad, reaches into the home of most every family. Television is a source for cognitive and affective learning as well as for socializing children. Television rivals both the family and the school as a shaping force in the lives of children. It has been estimated that the average child entering first grade has spent approximately 5,000 hours watching television. That same child between the ages of five and eighteen, watches approximately 16,000 hours of television as compared to 12,000 hours spent in school (Lehr, 1981). Television's potential effect on children's reading performance has become an issue of growing concern among educators in the past several years. However, it has been an almost impossible task to conduct comparative studies in the United States because television is so widespread. Parents, educators, school boards, as well as the general public, would benefit from the information concerning television's effects on reading achievement.

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Humphrey (1967) did a study involving children during the summer after first grade. The study was designed for these purposes: 1) to determine the reading loss or gain of first grade children during the summer of 1965 and 1966, 2) to develop and present a summer reading program by television, and 3) to test the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the means of reading achievement tests taken by children who did and did not participate in a summer televised instruction program. Activity booklets based on children's interests were written by teachers to compliment the television program. Forty half-hour lessons were presented on television. Experimental and control groups were tested in May and September using the California Test of Mental Maturity. The data indicate that children who watched over one-half of the summer television programs had higher intelligence scores, better presummer and postsummer reading scores in vocabulary, comprehension and total reading, and made gains in reading ability in all reading areas during the summer. The average reading scores for other groups declined during the summer.

In a second year study by Ball et, al. (1974) an evaluation of the Electric Company children's television series was conducted using reading tests to assess the skills and concepts addressed on the show. Tests were given in October and May, and teacher questionaires were administered three times during the second year. Classroom atmosphere during the viewing time was observed as well. The positive impact was as favorable as in the first, though the size of the impact in the second year was less. One year's viewing seemed to provide the major benefits for students. No particular teacher attitudes or behaviors were consistently found to have a relationship with student reading skill gains as measured by this evaluation.

Starkey and Swinford (1974) conducted a study using two hundred twenty-six fifth and sixth graders to correlate amount of television viewing and reading scores. It was found that the average viewing time per week for girls was 28 hours and for boys, 30 hours. A slight relationship was reported between reading ability and amount of leisure time spent watching television. The better readers were found to watch less television than poor readers. No relationship was shown between a child's access to a private television and his viewing time or reading ability. The authors conclude that not all television viewing is a bad influence on the child and that a child should be taught to be a discriminating television viewer.

In a final report, Sproull et, al. (1976) undertook an evaluation of the effects of the program, "Electric Company," on four, five and six year olds. The research was aimed at measuring reading gains, the retention of reading gains, and the differential effects of the age of the viewer. In general, the results tended to favor those children who had been "Electric Company" viewers, slightly, but not significantly. The most consistent results of the follow-up evaluation occurred in two "Electric Company" goal areas, left-to right and line-by-line progression. At the four and five year old age, the greatest difference between "Electric Company" viewers and non-viewers occurred on left-to-right and line-by-line progressions with pictures as test items. While six year old "Electric Company" viewers performed better than non-viewers on both progression tasks with pictures, the largest differences between six year old "Electric Company" viewers and non-viewers occurred with reading and writing progression tasks. The results of this study indicate that younger children, who are definitely among "Electric Company's" audience, and are certainly enthusiastic about the program, may also be learning related reading skills from The Electric Company.

In a study of the effects of television viewing and reading achievement in second grade (List, 1978), the teachers in the Montclair (New Jersey) school district identified students who read at least one year above grade level (high achievers) and students who read at primer level or below (low achievers). Parents of these students received letters asking them to complete and return enclosed calendars for the week of December 3, 1977, indicating what television programs their children watched at what times. Parents of 5 of 36 low achievers and 15 of 41 high achievers returned the calendars. The data revealed that low achievers watch an average of 18.7 hours of television per week, while high achievers average 12 hours of television viewing per week, indicating a negative relationship between reading and television viewing.

Feely (1980) has summarized a research review conducted at William Paterson College. Information is presented on the amount of time spent watching television, types of programs preferred by different age groups, and the impact of television on reading habits and achievement. No consistent relationship between television viewing and achievement was found.

Neuman (1980) did a review of studies of the relationship between television and children's interest and reading achievement. The relationship is complex and the researcher felt that further research studies using more sophisticated measures of viewing and reading behavior needed to be conducted before conclusions are made.

A three phase study was conducted in Alberta, Canada, to determine factors influencing reading achievement and specifically to assess the effects of television viewing on reading achievement (Mercer, 1980). In a survey regarding which factors the public felt were important in influencing reading achievement, it was concluded that they believed many factors

are responsible, with television playing a minor role. In a second phase, teachers and librarians responded to a similar survey, and an analysis of the results suggested they concurred with the general public on which factors are important influences on the development of reading abilities. In a final phase, children in grades 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 were surveyed to determine their reading and television viewing habits and attitudes and to assess the relationship between reading achievement. Among the results were: that for students in grades 4 and 6, there was a significant negative relationship between television viewing and reading achievement, but that for all other grade levels, reading achievement scores were not influenced by the amount of time spent watching television. Based on the results of all three phases of the study, it was concluded that television is not the most important factor influencing reading achievement.

Moldenhauer and Miller (1980) conducted a survey of 78 seventh graders to investigate the relationship between television and reading achievement. The report notes that good readers' viewing habits were not significantly different from those of poor readers.

Wagner (1980) reviews research concerning television's impact on students' reading interests and achievement. She states that there is an apparent scarcity of such research. If educators continue to design school programs based on reading, writing, speaking and listening, then it is crucial that we discover what specific effects television has on reading skills and ability. According to research that is available, intelligence effects a child's viewing and reading habits. Students of lower intelligence watch more television, while those of higher ability turn to reading with increasing frequency as they mature. However, if they continue their extensive television viewing, their ability to achieve declines.

Research conducted by Neuman and Prowda (1981) examined the relationship between reading performance and television viewing. The state of Connecticut, in its third assessment of educational progress in reading, included questions relating to reading materials available in students' homes, their television viewing habits and their attitudes toward reading. Approximately 8,000 students in grades 4, 8, and 11 were tested. The results indicated that older students spent less time watching television than did younger students. In addition, the number of students reporting "enjoyment" with reading decreased with age, while the number of students reporting a "dislike" of reading increased with age. Reading scores for the fourth grade students, the heaviest viewers, were relatively unrelated to television viewing. However, for eighth and eleventh grade students, those watching more than four hours of television a day, scored lower on achievement than those watching a more moderate amount, indicating an inverse relationship between heavy television viewing and reading achievement. This may be due to the cumulative effects of television, to the increase in vocation and social involvement of older students, or the fact that students with poor reading habits continued to be heavy viewers.

In another study conducted by Neuman (1981), the relationship between television viewing and reading behavior within a sample of 198 fourth, fifth and sixth grade students were examined. She specifically dealt with whether the amount and specific content of television being viewed affected reading achievement and leisure reading patterns. Intelligence and reading achievement scores of each participant in the study were obtained with parental permission. The families of the subjects completed logs of specific television shows watched, and recorded the number of books, newspapers and magazines read during a four-week period. Results of the

analysis indicated that the total amount of television viewed was not related to reading achievement and leisure reading habits.

Starkey and Starkey (1981) conducted a study to determine some differences between third grade children who were reading up to expected levels and those who were reading below expectancy as determined by the Spache formula. Those who read up to expectancy were more likely to understand why they were asked to complete worksheets at school, to read in bed at home, to have a hobby or a pet, and to enjoy reading at home than those who were reading below expectancy. No difference was found between the two groups in terms of mothers working outside the home, amount of television watched or favorite books or television programs.

In a research report by Degrosky (1981), data were collected from 123 seventh and eighth grade students to examine the relationship between the quality of television viewing and reading achievement, age, grade, sex, socioeconomic status and intelligence quotient. Quality of television viewing time had a statistically significant relationship to sex and reading test scores. Reading test scores were significantly related to IQ, grade level and quality of television viewing.

A study was undertaken by Bachen et al. (1982) to explore the process underlying the relationship between television viewing and reading achievement. Results showed that: 1) reading abilities are dependent upon more than just the formal reading instruction offered by schools, 2) certain orientation toward reading or television can augment the effects of the amount of reading or viewing a child does and 3) it is possible to locate an orientation within television sequence that positively predicts reading achievement with cognitive involvement with television representing skills that paralled those necessary for good reading.

In another study by Neuman and Prowda (1982) involving over 7500

students, they found that reading for pleasure should be emphasized and television viewing more carefully monitored by teachers and parents.

Some of the studies maintain that there is a negative effect between television viewing and reading achievement, especially in younger students. Some studies assume there is a negative relationship between the two and believe that time previously devoted to reading has been displaced by television viewing.

Another point of view on the positive side suggests that television can stimulate reading. The success of "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company" for younger children are two such shows that suggest this view. The teaching of critical viewing skills in the classroom is thought to be beneficial to teach students to understand how television works, to distinguish between "real" and "fanciful", to understand the different types of programs, as well as to be aware of what they watch and how they can control their viewing habits.

Perhaps the answer to this dilemma is more sophisticated measurements and methodologies to determine if television viewing does have an effect on reading achievement.

Television in education is a controversy that will not go away (Lange, 1981). As educators, perhaps, we need to teach students how to effectively learn from it. "It may truly become the educational medium of the future." (Lehr, 1981).

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